

Region 5 Superintendents' Focus Group Summary

Region 5 Education Service Center

JANUARY 9, 2002, 10:00 - 11:30

Purpose of the Focus Group

The purpose of the focus group is to gather opinions and philosophies of Region 5 Superintendents on the subject of how their districts relate to the workforce development of Southeast Texas. What are the barriers to preparing students for the world of work?

Focus Topics

- Are you aware of the services provided by the Southeast Texas Workforce Development Board?
- Discuss your district's role in the career decision-making process of students
 - Rank the career decision-making process relative to other activities
 - Barriers associated with focusing on career exploration
 - Problems associated with connecting academics to chosen careers
- Discuss your district's role in preparing students for employment.
 - What can be done to improve their success rate?
 - How can employers help?
- Discuss your district's role in the economic development of the region
 - Do you see education as an economic development tool?
 - Do you participate in local Chamber of Commerce activities?
- What can business and industry do to improve your success?

Are you aware of the services provided by the Southeast Texas Workforce Development Board?

All of the participating superintendents were aware of the existence of the Board and had some awareness of the services provided.

Discuss your district's role in the career decision-making process of students.

- The career decision-making process has taken on a more significant role in the last 3 or 4 years.
- All participating superintendents agreed that there was some form of career awareness activity in their district but disagreed on how much of a role the district should have in the process.
- There should be an ongoing focus at all grade levels
- Since the world of work is changing so rapidly and rapid career changes are expected in the work place, public school students should not be encouraged to make a specific career decision but should concentrate on a solid core curriculum that will allow them to exercise career options upon graduation.
- Students not planning to attend college need more career-choice direction than those who will attend college
- Districts need to provide opportunities for students to gain career experience
- Career decision-making should not be a separate activity but should be incorporated into the academic classes. Place more emphasis on teaching academics as they relate to the careers that utilize them.

Barriers to focusing on career exploration

- Rural school districts face a more difficult challenge due to the lack of major business and industry presence in their community. The size of the district also limits the scope of curriculum offered to students.
- The length of the school day is a barrier to career awareness activities. The community is demanding that districts offer more extra-curricular activities for students, which takes away from the time required for students to achieve the academics needed for graduation.
- Student/counselor ratio is too large. Counselors are spending the majority of their time in crisis management and administrative duties and therefore have little time for actual career advisement.

Problems with connecting academic to chose careers.

- Most teachers have never worked in private industry; therefore they do not understand the connection between academics and careers.
- More teachers need to job shadow and intern in private industry to become aware of the relevance of their disciplines to the skill requirements of employers.
- More staff development needed to show teachers how to integrate employer skill requirements into their academic classes.
- Care must be taken to avoid the perception that districts are adding counseling duties to the teaching load

District's role in preparing students for employment

- All participating superintendents agreed that one of the roles of the district is to prepare students for employment but there is confusion in the districts as to how this role is to be accomplished.
- The role of the district is not to get students a job but rather to prepare them for the world of work and a successful life by providing a solid core of academics and activities that prepares them with the necessary skills for success.
- There seems to be a two-track system for students to chose from in high school. One track is for college-bound students who concentrate on academics and the other is for non college-bound students who concentrate on employability skills. The district's role is not to lock students into one track but allow flexibility of course selection based on the changing needs of the student.

What can employers do to imprive the district's success

- Attempt to understand the problems of public education
- Be less critical and more cooperative -- ask what they can do to help
- Employers should not only continue to set high expectations from districts but also offer feedback and assist districts in reaching their goals.
- Volunteer help without being asked.
- Partner with districts for planning and allocation of resources to include people and funding
- Provide tutors for school districts
- Provide job shadowing and internship opportunities for students and staff of district
- Most school districts continue to be under-funded -- particularly rural districts. Employers can help by exerting political influence to increase educational funding and to reduce tax exemptions.
- Promote parental involvement by providing family friendly policies in the work place
 - Assure that the job doesn't interfere with employees' quality time with families
 - Allow employees flextime to participate in their children's school activities
- Rural districts need industry to move into their community to not only increase the tax base but to improve the quality of life
- Employers need to think regionally when supporting education. Since Southeast Texans drive from many communities to work for major employers in the region, it would seem reasonable that

these employers would want to improve the education in all regional school districts rather than just the school district in which they have a physical presence.

Do you see education as an economic development tool?

- All participating superintendents agreed that public education is an economic development tool, although it falls somewhat outside the role of the district
- School districts have a responsibility to the community.
- People want to live in a quality school district; therefore property values are affected by the quality of the district
- Economic development committees should be involved but not rule the education process
- Keep training general rather than specific to industry